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ABSTRACT

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concept of human ecology emphasizes the effect of the environment, both physical and psychological, on individual development. Bronfenbrenner's contexts which affect the development of the individual (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem) can also be defined for the family in an ecological model of family wellness. The family's microsystem consists of family members, both nuclear and extended, and the perceptions and expectations they hold for the family. The family's mesosystem involves settings in which individual family members operate alone: the parents' workplace, the child's school, the neighborhood. The third level of influence, the exosystem, involves settings in which the family as a whole or individual members of the family are not likely to be directly involved. This context is the point at which society has influence upon what goes on within the family. The final level of influence, the macrosystem, involves the orientation of the society toward families and what families do. In terms of family wellness, Bronfenbrenner's concept of an ecological transition can be seen as involving changes in the family's relationship to its broader environment. Those interested in facilitating and supporting family wellness can emphasize ecological transitions which move the family toward a state of greater wellness. (NB)

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Family Wellness: An Ecological Perspective

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The concept of "wellness" is a rapidly developing one. David R. Mace, in the book Prevention in Family Services: Approaches to Family Wellness (1983), applied this term to families. He defined "family wellness" as representing

> "... people moving toward the appropriation of their full relational potential. It is not a static condition because people are always growing and changing and static relationships would mean an end to growth. It is a continuous and creative adaptation to the ever-changing world, within and without, in which persons live and move and have their being. ...When we talk of 'family wellness,' we are thinking of a condition that would represent the highest ideal we could entertain for our own family and the summit of achievement we could wish for any other family." (page 24)

Bowman (1983) indicated that there seems to be agreement within the literature as to the general indicators of what constitutes a healthy family. These indicators include communication, appreciation and respect shown by family members for one another, a spiritual or religious commitment, family adaptability and flexibility, and a clarity of family rules.

This paper is an attempt to examine issues involved in family wellness using the concepts of "human ecology". This approach, proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), Margaret Bubolz (Bubolz, Eicher, Sontag,1979), and others emphasizes the effect of the environment, both physical and psychological, on the development

of the individual. In the present analysis these concepts will be applied to understanding a family's level of wellness. The concepts which have been discussed in terms of their implications for the individual will be discussed in terms of what they have to say about the development and functioning of a family. In this paper, emphasis will be placed on the application of Bronfenbrenner's model (1979). This model places the development of the individual within a series of ever-broadening contexts.

Before applying this approach to the understanding of family wellness, several important elements of Bronfenbrenner's theory should be defined. These concepts are discussed below.

The Concepts of Human Ecology.

Bronfenbrenner, in his book The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design (1979) defines the ecology of human development as "...the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accomodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of immediate settings in which a developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded" (page 21). This definition sees the developing person as an active participant in the developmental process, and not as a passive recipient of actions taken by others in his environment.

This concept can be extended to families in terms of how the family interacts with and is affected by both what goes on among its members as well as how the family interacts with other, broader aspects of the world in which it functions. Thus we can think of the family's interaction being an important determiner of its wellness. How the family interacts with the larger community beyond its confines will also have implications for the family's functioning.

The situations which determine how an individual develops are described by Bronfenbrenner as not simply the presently experienced setting, but also more remote settings in which the individual may or may not be involved. Other contexts affecting the individual involve the social and cultural milieu in which the directly experienced settings occur. In this way the approach of family members toward each other may be determined not only by the relationship they have with each other, but also by factors such as the relationship they have with others beyond the boundaries of the family, the financial resources they can bring to bear to the family setting, as well as their cultural and ethnic background. Such elements provide a developmental context for the family, since these circumstances affect how members of the family interact with each other. These contexts are presented in Figure 1.

Bronfenbrenner identified several layers of context which affects the development of the individual. These levels, as they

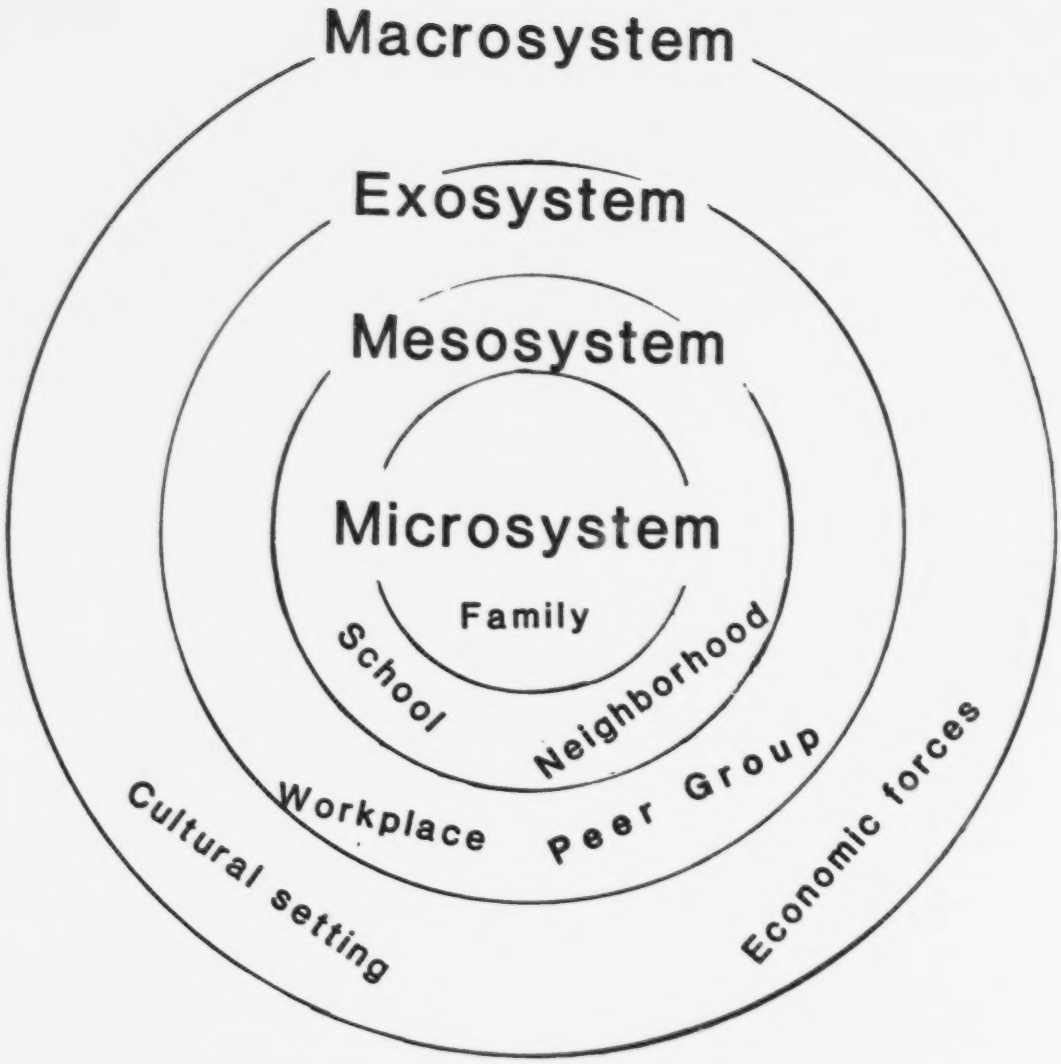

FIGURE 1

THE CONTEXTS OF FAMILY WELLNESS

relate to the family, can be seen as being progressively farther removed from the family and its members. Each level can be seen as having unique implications for the development and operation of the famly. These levels can also be seen as having implications for the working of the family. They are defined below.

Levels of Influence

The setting closest to the family is the microsystem. This system is made up of the family unit and the roles and behavior patterns which individuals within it follow. Bronfenbrenner emphasizes the importance of the perceptual element at this and all levels (page 22). He states that how family members see their and others' roles and responsiblities is just as important as what these roles and responsibilities actually are.

Other elements, while not continuously involving all members of a family, may very well have a significant impact on what takes place in the family situation. One such system is the mesosystem, defined by Bronfenbrenner as incorporating the interrelationships among two or more settings in which a developing person participates. The mesosystem, then, is a system of microsystems or other, broader contexts. While a family member may have positive experiences in several microsystems individually, the cumulative effect may be negative,

due to these systems either being in direct competition with one another, or expecting incompatable behavior on the part of the person. An example is provided by considering the behavior expected of children in a school situation as compared to that expected in their family setting. In the former setting children are likely to be expected to show great independence and an ability to follow rules and procedures. In the family context, however, children are likely to be expected to show more dependence and to follow a less demanding standard of behavior. While children may address such demands successfully in each particular setting, the conflict that continues to exist between these settings may interfere with the children's overall developmental progress.

The exosystem is the first layer of the environment in which particular family members may not have any significant direct experience. It is made up of settings that affect individuals indirectly, by affecting others involved in the family microsystem. Such settings include parents' workplace, children's peer groups, or caregivers' family situations. While all members of the family are not part of these settings, what happens in these situations may affect the resources, both economic and emotional, that members bring to the family.

The macrosystem is one step farther removed from the family. It provides the context for the other systems previously discussed. This system includes the overriding political,

economic, social, and psychological aspects of the culture in which the micro-, meso-, and exosystems exist. These elements are those which take a common form within a particular culture, but which may vary markedly from one culture to another. Bronfenbrenner refers to the macrosystem as a cultural blueprint.

Gordon (1979) concludes that these broader cultural elements, while remote from the physical setting of the family, help shape the way families use time and what activities they participate in. More recently, evidence has been accumulating that demographic and social trends are having a direct and lasting impact on families as a whole (McCloughlin and Guillo, 1985). One such trend involves the dramatic increase in the number of children living in poor, single parent family settings (Ziegler and Muenchow, 1984).

A final concept which is important to the development of an understanding of family wellness is that of "transaction" (Gordon, 1975). This concept has several things to add to an understanding of the functioning of a family. First, this idea argues that whatever happens developmentally in a family is a reflection of a continously interactive process between the family and its surroundings. This concept sees the family as an <u>active</u> participant in the establishment and maintenance of its wellbeing. A second component of this concept indicates that every individual is unique. So it is with families. Every

family has unique characteristics, ways of interacting both within itself and with other elements of its world.

Gordon states (1979) that this uniqueness brings to the process of development the potential for either a match or mismatch between the individual and the surrounding environment in which this individual develops. Such may also be seen in families. Certain families may find their surroundings very enabling, while other families may find the very same environment restrictive and destructive. This circumstance is not the result of or the fault of either the family or its surroundings, but instead is a function of the unique character shown by each and every family and how this character relates to the family's surroundings.

These concepts, as they have been explained, can be used to propose a framework for understanding the development and maintenance of wellness in a family. What follows is an attempt to examine how the ecology within which the family operates provides opportunities and restrictions for the family and its members.

The Ecology of Family Wellness

Table 1 provides an application of the concepts of human ecology to family wellness. The implications of each layer of influence identified by Bronfenbrenner (1979) will be discussed in terms of its implications for family wellness.

TABLE I

BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL LEVELS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO FAMILY WELLNESS

CONTEXT	CHARACTERISTICS	ELEMENTS	RELATIONSHIP TO FAMILY WELLNESS
MICROSYSTEM	Family interactions, family rules, roles, expectations, and beliefs. Cultural factors as well as family of origin issues have an impact on this context.	Couple, children, extended family members. Family beliefs and family values.	The skills and abilities shown by family members, patterns of interaction exhibited within the family. All are open to the effect of enrichment activities.
MESOSYSTEM	Involves settings in which family members operate, either alone or together. Such as parents' workplaces, children's schools, the family's neighborhod, community, or church.	Family members, bosses, teachers, friends, other families, institutional representatives (policemen, firemen, clergy, etc.)	Has implications for the resources the family has available to it. Determines what opportunities the family has, such as quality of schools, libraries, museums, and other family enrichment activities and institutions.
EXOSYSTEM	Settings in which family members are <u>not</u> necessarily involved in together, but which may have important implications for the family.	Rules, regulations that are implemented by community, state, or country. The attitudes or approaches community develops toward families and implications of these for a particular family.	Approaches established by society which determine what is appropriate for the family to do and whether the family family can, in fact, do it. Costs of enrichment activities, regulations having implicatons for family interaction.
MACROSYSTEM	The general orientation of a society toward families and what families do. The values, mores, and expectations a culture has for families and their members	Cultural values toward families and its members. What activities and interactions are appropriate and seen as important for families and their members.	Helps determine what are appropriate roles of family members and helps establish parameters of family interactions.

The first context for family wellness is the microsystem. This setting involves what goes on within the family itself. It involves the roles, and rules of the family, and the expectations of members of the family. This sphere of influence is made up of family members, both nuclear and extended, as well as the perceptions and expectations these individuals hold for the family. How the family operates within this arena defines the family's wellness. It incorporates the level of affect, the efficiency of communication, and the commitment individual family members feel toward the family. All of these elements are open to the effect of what has traditionally been referred to as enrichment activities, whether they be designed to enhance communication skills or provide the opportunity for recreation and socialization (Sawin, 1979).

The next farther removed context for the family is the mesosystem. This involves settings in which individual family members operate either singly or alone. What happens in the parents' workplace, the child's school setting, or in the neighborhood or community may help determine the family's state of wellness. The elements of this context include not only the interactions between family members themselves, but also contacts the family or its members have with teachers, bosses, friends, other extended family members, as well as representatives of the institutions the family may come into contact with (policemen, firemen, healthcare providers, etc.). This milieu is of great

importance to the state of the family. The resources the family or its members can employ to strengthen the family are determined here. Thus whether the family can take advantage of cultural and artistic activities, use library facilities or museums, or have available to them services to be employed in emergencies (hospitals, social service agencies, healthcare facilities) is the result of what happens at this level.

The third level of influence, the exosystem involves settings in which the family as a whole or individual members of the family are not likely to be directly involved. This context is the point at which the overall society has influence upon what goes on within the family. Thus socially determined rules, regulations, or requirements that are established by the community, state or country make up this setting. Also included in this realm are the attitudes or approaches a community exhibits toward families and their activities. Issues include how the community defines the family, what rules and regulations the family has to attend to, and how the family adapts to these parameters.

This level may determine both the type of activities a family has available to it as well as the cost of these activities. The exosystem involves whether a community has many resources available as well as whether these resources are expensive to use, either in terms of time or money. The factors of availability and cost have implications for how or whether

families within the community will develop an increased level of wellness.

An overriding context for the family and the family's wellness is the macrosystem. This involves the consistencies found in the previously described settings. For families, the macrosystem involves the orientation of the society toward families and what families do. It incorporates the values, mores, and expectations a culture holds for families and members of families. The elements of family wellness determined by this realm include the activities and interactions that are seen as appropriate and what are seen as important for their families and their members.

Recently, the importance of this level of influence has been highlighted by the changes that have occurred in this country in terms of sex role expectations. Changes in what society defines as appropriate and correct for men and women have had an important influence on what is considered family wellness. The expectations for men and women, mothers and fathers, provide for families a context for their interactions and activities. They help establish guidelines for the ways family members interrelate and what they do.

Ecological Transitions

A final concept from Bronfenbrenner's approach that has implications for family wellness is that development involves

ecological transitions. An ecological transition is defined by Bronfenbrenner as involving the alteration of a person's position in the ecological environment (page 26). An individual's ecological transition involves a change in that person's role, the setting in which the person operates, or both. Examples of such transitions include the birth of a child (especially a first child), the beginning of a new job, or the graduation from high school.

In terms of family wellness, an ecological transition can be seen as involving changes in the family's relationship to its broader environment. An ecological transition can result from a specific learning activity, such as a family enrichment activity, or it may result from some change in an individual family member. A family may experience such a transition as the result of a family member's change in status, such as the attainment of an educational or professional goal, the recognition of some prized characteristic of a family member, or some other positive circumstance.

A negative ecological transition for a family may result from a family member suffering some injury, some serious illness, or some loss of status. The loss of a job or a demotion in job responsibility, for example, may have devastating implications for the family.

Those interested in facilitating and suporting family wellness can emphasize ecological transitions which move the family toward

a state of greater wellness. Activities such as developing support networks for families, assisting families or members of families in developing abilities and insights are all appropriate focal points for programs interesting in strengthening families.

Conclusions

By applying an ecological orientation to family wellness, issues to be addressed can be more completely understood. It soon becomes apparent that while what happens within the family has important consequences for its wellness, circumstances occurring in contexts well beyond the boundaries of the family have equally important implications for the family and how it operates.

Such a realization makes possible the development of a more complete and accurate model of family wellness. While much of what is needed to foster family wellness involves the development of skills on the part of particular family members (e.g. Travis & Travis, 1983; Gordon, 1983; Wackman, 1983), or the facilitation of the family as a system (Sawin, 1985), issues such as the availability of community resources and the accessiblity of these resources to the family and its members can have a direct impact on the family's level of wellness. By using a broader framework for examining family wellness, a fuller range of resources for families can be targeted and worked toward. These resources may

be provided by churches, neighborhoods, schools, communities, states, or the nation as a whole.

Family wellness should also be advanced in the political and economic arenas. Advocates for family wellness must present their case to legislative bodies to aggressively promote laws and regulations which facilitate family functioning. Further, coporate America must be convinced of the return to be realized from an investment aimed at facilitating family functioning. Ways corporations and businesses can promote family wellness include corporate child care, broadly based employee assistance programs, as well as rules, regulations, and expectations designed to emphasize the importance of families for the betterment of business. Such approaches will pay off in terms of improved employee morale, increased productivity, and decreased employee turnover.

The task is challenging. The present analysis is but a first step. It now is time to move ahead along a broad front to improve and promote family wellness throughout its many contexts.

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